

Sermon for Advent IV
December 20, 2009
Christ Church, Andover

Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 3 or 15 ; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth just might be the most unlikely, the most exuberant, intimate, the most *Spirit-filled*, encounter of two people in all of scripture. What a simple, yet beautiful picture it is! Mary is a young girl, most likely in her early to mid teens, and has just arrived in the Judean hills after a long journey from Galilee – probably a two or three day journey on foot. She arrives alone. Mary has very possibly been sent here to the home of her older relative to prevent a scandal back home. Mary is unmarried, and she is pregnant.

Elizabeth is a much older woman, a relative of Mary's, and the wife of a priest, Zechariah. In those days, that meant she would be a person of high standing in her community. She was a woman, who together with her husband, we're told, was righteous, blameless before the Lord. The combination of her age, her social status, and her impeccable reputation, made her someone to be looked up to, admired – someone to be reckoned with. And yet, there was until now a terrible sadness in her life, too. Elizabeth had no children. In a time when to be childless was a mark of disgrace, Elizabeth had struggled to maintain her dignity in a world that could be harsh and unforgiving. She was now well past child-bearing age, but a miraculous thing had occurred. Elizabeth was expecting a baby.

Her husband, a priest of advanced old age, was in disbelief when the angel Gabriel appeared to him at the altar of incense in the temple to announce that his barren wife would bear a son. And because of his disbelief, Zechariah had been stricken dumb until the time of his son's birth. That birth was now still three months away.

And so, when Mary enters the home of the priest Zechariah, his welcome is that of a silent gesture. He is dumb. The old doubting priest now welcomes the young Mary, whose response to her visitation from the Lord had been so very different,

into his home. Mary comes into the house, looks past Zechariah and sees Elizabeth standing in the doorway and she greets her, perhaps a bit timidly at first, as a young person would to an older, distinguished relative. There they stand, two pregnant women, looking at one another with the kind of recognition that only two pregnant women can have for each other. They have that knowing, empathic look – aware of all the emotions, the changes in the body, perhaps some sympathy for the nausea and sickness that often go along with it. But on top of all that, there are the highly unlikely circumstances of both of these two pregnancies. One late in life. Perhaps Elizabeth is even a little embarrassed. The other early and without the benefit of marriage. Both are attested to by the visitation of angels, and the assurance that the child they each are to bear will be a special, holy child.

And as Mary greets Elizabeth, something amazing happens. The child in Elizabeth's womb gives her a big swift kick! It LEAPS in her womb! And with that, it is as if Elizabeth's eyes are opened. Something in her knows that the child Mary is carrying will be the promised Messiah, the one she goes on to refer to as "my Lord." The intimacy between these two women suddenly goes to a whole new level. Elizabeth is *filled with the Holy Spirit*, and losing all composure she cries out to the young Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." The normal protocols of youth and age, low or high social standing go out the window. And suddenly it is no longer Mary who is honored to be in the home of her older relative, but Elizabeth who begins to exclaim in disbelief to the young virgin, Mary, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of *my Lord* comes to *me*? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb *leaped for joy*." And then, knowing what had happened to her husband when he had doubted the angel, she said, "And blessed is she who *believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

From that point Mary goes on, perhaps in a state of ecstasy herself, to speak the Magnificat which we sang just a few minutes ago – that beautiful hymn of praise familiar to us from vespers or the evening prayer service – words that have been set to music perhaps more than any other biblical text by famous composers, ancient and modern. Music that to this day thrills us with the ecstatic joy and

wonder of Mary's words: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my savior. For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his Name. And his mercy is on them that fear him, throughout all generations."

From Mary's entrance and greeting, perhaps the touch of each to the other, to Elizabeth's recognition, to Mary's exuberant hymn, there's a depth of intimacy in this story that we can barely comprehend – perhaps especially for those of us who have never born and never *will* bear children.

As a companion to my wife, Carolyn, during two pregnancies, I can remember some vague feelings of *envy* from time to time – pregnancy envy! Not during the times when she was puking up her guts! I did not envy that, but during those times when she could feel the baby moving inside her, or when she would talk about the feelings she had, knowing that our child was growing inside her. I loved to feel the movements, and to press on her tummy to feel the developing limbs of our little unseen miracle – wondering what it must have been like for the two of them, mother and child, to be so close, to be one body yet two people as they were. I often put my ear to her belly to listen to the gurgling sounds, and then place my throat there to talk or sing to this mysterious little presence. I was determined that both of our two children would be born recognizing the voice of their daddy, just as they would the voice and every other sound of their mother's body. But even so, it was an intimacy that I could only dream about, and never fully achieve. The two of them, mother and child, had something together that I would never fully know. I tried to make up for that with the several middle of the night (not always totally willing, I must say) 2 or 3 am excursions into town to find things like rhubarb pie and... pickles with ice cream... (and I don't know what else) to satisfy the cravings of this intimate duo. I was an enchanted if not always enthusiastic slave to the whole process.

So, when I see Mary and Elizabeth in this unforgettable encounter, there is something in me, and perhaps in all of us, that *desires* what they have. And it's not only the idea of a baby in them, and the closeness of that relationship; but in

the case of Mary, it is *the very presence of God* in that intimate encounter between the human and the divine. Mary, you see, was to be the vehicle through which God's presence was revealed, and brought into the world and into our consciousness in a whole new way. And in the case of Elizabeth and the baby who leaps in her womb, what is so compelling is that *recognition* of the divine presence in her midst.

Isn't that what we all really, really want after all? To be able not only to be bearers of God's presence into the world, but also to be able to recognize it in others?

The story doesn't tell us anything about Zechariah during this encounter. I'm not much of an artist, but if I were going to paint this scene, as many artists have, I would include Zechariah in it. He would be standing off to the side, looking at the two of them looking at each other, with a kind of holy envy. Tears would be streaming down his face. Still speechless, he would recognize what he had not been able to when the angel appeared to him, that a great mystery was in play, and yes, he too was part of it. It is the mystery of the ages: God's presence coming among us, breaking forth into our reality. I like to think that while he was just a little slower to grasp it than they were, he was still able to share in the beauty and wonder of that moment, his eyes opened even if his ears were not yet.

You and I may be a little slow, too, to recognize God's presence in ourselves or in others. We may be more like Zechariah than either Elizabeth or Mary. And we may not have the words to speak or to articulate what this presence is all about. But just our *desire* to know this presence is a great start. What's so wonderful is that we have all been promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. *God's presence in us* is assured in our baptism. And if we will pay attention, and open ourselves as Mary and Elizabeth did, and (I want to say) even as old Zechariah eventually did, we too can know the joy, the comfort, and the intimacy of God's presence.

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